# Supporting mental health & well-being in our communities:

# Tool kit for sex workers' rights activists

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# ABOUT US

The European Sex Workers' Rights Alliance (ESWA) is a sex worker-led network representing +100 organisations led by or working with sex workers in 35 countries in Europe and Central Asia. The core aim of ESWA is to ensure that the voices of sex workers in the region are heard, listened to and respected. We strive to raise awareness about the social exclusion of sex workers in Europe and Central Asia; to promote the human, health and labour rights of all sex workers at community, national and regional level; and to build alliances with key partners, including sex workers and their organisations globally, NGOs and other civil society organisations and key stakeholders at the level of EU policy and decision-making.

# INTRODUCTION

This resource was developed by the European Sex Workers' Rights Alliance (ESWA) to give sex workers rights activists practical information on the topics of sex work and mental health. Mental health is a complex topic and this resource does not claim to be exhaustive. This tool kit provides practical information, examples of successful projects by sex workers organisations and links to further reading on these topics. In case of emergency turn to professional help.

# WHAT IS MENTAL HEALTH?

**Mental health** includes our **emotional, psychological, and social well-being.** It affects how we think, feel, and act. It also helps determine how we handle stress, relate to others, and make choices. Mental health is important at every stage of life, from childhood and adolescence through adulthood.

Although the terms are often used interchangeably, **poor mental health and mental illness are not the same.** A person can experience poor mental health and not be diagnosed with a mental illness. Likewise, a person diagnosed with a mental illness can experience periods of physical, mental, and social well-being.

Source: CDC, About mental health, 2021

# WHAT IS A MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS?

A mental health crisis is any situation in which a person's actions, feelings, and behaviours can lead to them hurting themselves or others and/or put them at risk of being unable to care for themselves or function in the community.

Situations that can lead to a mental health crisis can include stress at home life such as ,conflicts with loved ones, exposure to trauma, or violence. In addition, stress at work or in education settings and other environmental stress can also contribute to a mental health crisis.

**Potential Signs of a Mental Health Crisis**

A mental health crisis can manifest in a variety of ways. There is no one indicator that a person is experiencing a mental health emergency or may attempt suicide, but here some signs to look for. The person may be:

- Unable to complete daily tasks like getting dressed, brushing teeth, bathing, etc.
- Verbally saying, writing or insinuating that they'd like to kill themselves and/or talking about death
- Withdrawing from friends, family and their typical social situations
- Showing impulsive or reckless behavior, being aggressive
- Having dramatic shifts in mood, sleeping or eating patterns

**Check with the person if they are:**

- feeling extremely anxious and having panic attacks or flashbacks
- feeling suicidal, or self-harming
- having an episode of hypomania or mania, (feeling very high) or psychosis (maybe hearing voices, or feeling very paranoid).

**Sources:**

KVC Health systems, What Does a Mental Health Crisis Look Like?, 2018

Mind, Crisis services and planning, 2020

# WHAT TO DO IN CASE OF A MENTAL HEALTH CRISIS?

When supporting a person facing a mental health crisis, there are techniques that can help you de-escalate a crisis, including: listening to the person, keeping your voice calm,moving slowly, and avoiding making judgemental comments. Here are the things you can discuss and information you can gather to create a preparedness plan:

- Know where to go for help. This can be a community mental health centre, emergency room or psychiatric treatment facility. Look for the number of the national suicide prevention lifeline in your country. Beware that (mental) health institutions can also involve risks for specific people such as undocumented migrants, parents etc...
- Identify family members and friends who can be available for help and to support the person in crisis.
- Compile the phone numbers and names of the person's primary care doctor, psychiatrist, therapist and other healthcare providers, if applicable.
- Compile a list of the medications and diagnoses the person has.
- Compile a list of the emotional and verbal triggers that typically affect the person, if possible.
- Consider things that have helped to stabilise and regulate the person in the past.
- Remove weapons, unprescribed medications, and items that can cause risk to their life.

# WHAT CAN YOUR ORGANISATION DO TO IMPROVE THE MENTAL HEALTH OF SEX WORKERS?

Sex workers' organisations can offer different types of mental health support for sex workers depending on their financial and organisational capacities. This toolkit focuses on giving tools for sex worker-led organisations to cope with mental health crises and improve the mental health and well-being of sex workers in general. This toolkit provides different examples of best practices by sex worker-led organisations, some of which can be implemented with limited budget.

## FIGHTING ISOLATION AND STIGMA: MEET-UPS FOR SEX WORKERS

### How does it work?

You can set up regular meetings for and by sex workers to exchange on different topics that affect them. This is an opportunity for sex workers to talk about how they feel in their work and private lives in an informal environment that does not require the of presence of a mental health professional and is safer since it is for sex workers only.

### Resources needed

- Hosts for the meet-ups.
- A coordinator is helpful to do the planning and coordinate the hosts of the meet-ups.
- A safe place to meet or an online platform.
- A safe space policy or code of conduct.
- A communication strategy to spread the word as much as possible within the community.

## Examples

### Call Girls'n Coffee, PIC, The Netherlands

CnC started a few years ago run by a volunteer who felt it was important to have a meet-up for escorts to socialise and exchange on different topics. It is now open to all sex workers in English or in Dutch and happens once a month at the Prostitution Information Center in Amsterdam. The topics are announced in advance with the invitation to the meet-up.

CnC was first running on a volunteer basis and recently received funding for coordination, travel expenses, food and drinks.

**Financial compensation for participants**

Have you thought about financial compensation for travel or childcare for sex workers who want to attend your meeting, event or workshop? If your collective has no funding, the drop-in can be run on a donation basis to support more precarious workers.

### Café and Peer workshops, Hydra, Germany

Hydra organises a café and peer workshops on a regular basis. The Café is open at a specific time every week, and the peer workshops are focused on a particular theme depending on the skills of the sex worker hosting the workshop that day (themes range from booty shaking to camming or are focused on a specific group of sex workers such as trans sex workers or latinxs sex workers). The sex worker facilitating the workshop is financially compensated.

The workshops happen in different locations (online during the COVID-19 pandemic) and take place in different languages. Find more info here.

## CREATING GUIDELINES ABOUT HOW TO DEAL WITH MENTAL HEALTH ISSUES

### How does it work?

Your organisation can provide guidelines and resources about how to deal with mental health issues. The guidelines can be published on the organisation's website and/or distributed via leaflets. The advantage is that it requires little work once the resources are ready and can be updated once a year, if needed. It is easily accessible for sex workers, especially if they are available in different languages.

### Resources needed

- A person or a team to develop the guidelines (a sex workers friendly mental health professional and a sex worker for example).
- Translators, if possible.
- A website and/or printed leaflets.
- A communication strategy to spread the guidelines as much as possible within the community.

### Examples

National Ugly Mugs (NUM), United Kingdom

NUM developed resources for sex workers to cope with mental health crisis such as suicidal thoughts, loss and grief. The resources can be found on their website and in the following links: on suicide awareness and prevention, a safety plan template, on losing someone and grief.

## MAKING A LIST OF SEX WORKER-FRIENDLY THERAPISTS

### How does it work?

Your organisation may develop a list of sex worker-friendly therapists. The list can be shared publically on your organisations' website or shared privately with other sex workers.

### Resources needed

- A coordinator to make a list and get in contact with therapists based on sex workers' recommendations.
- A panel of sex workers experts to decide on the criteria for sex work-friendly therapy.
- Translators for the languages therapists can provide therapy in.
- A website and/or printed leaflets.
- A communication strategy to reach the community.

### Examples

#### Roter Stöckelschuh, BeSD, Germany

The Roter Stöckelschuh project, or "Red High Heel" in English, is a listing of health care professionals that are sex worker-friendly. If a sticker of a red high heel is on the door of a health practitioner, it means that they are sex worker-friendly. There is also a website with a database where sex workers can look for any health specialist, from mental health professionals to general practitioner or gynaecologists and the system aims to be extended to lawyers, tax advisors and other advice centres.

Health practitioners can fill in an online questionnaire available on the website, and sex workers can also recommend a practitioner they know and trust. Advice for health practitioners are written on the website and trainings are available on a regular basis. The project is supported by institutional and commercial sponsors. Find more info here.

#### National Ugly Mugs (NUM), United Kingdom

NUM has developed a project during the COVID-19 pandemic about mental health. They set up a directory of sex work-friendly therapists on their website along with support sessions on various topics open for sex workers and therapists who want to be more sex worker inclusive. Sex

workers with financial difficulties also have the option to select a therapist that has subscribed to "NUM packages" and receive 3 sessions for free, 1 offered by the therapist and 2 paid by NUM. To be listed as sex worker-friendly, therapists have to sign up for key principles such as supporting decriminalisation of sex work as a model to improve sex workers' rights, believing that sex workers have the right to self-determination or the right to live free from violence . Sex workers can access the list available on the NUM website or contact a case worker whorefers them to the project. Find more info here.

**Transparency**

It is always a good idea to be transparent about the methodology used to select sex worker-friendly therapists so state clearly what the process of the making of list is.

You can also write a disclaimer that your organisation can recommend therapists based on other sex workers' experiences but can not ensure that all therapists listed might not have stigmatising attitude regarding other topics or identities.

## OFFERING FREE COUNSELLING FOR SEX WORKERS

### How does it work?

Your organisation pays for counselling sessions for sex workers. It is probably a limited amount of sessions per sex workers depending on the funding available. Your organisation can work with therapists to offer an amount of sessions for free for sex workers in their practice. If you rather hire a therapist to work at the location of your organisation make sure that the privacy of the sessions are ensured.

### Resources needed

- Volunteer or paid therapist(s) who will provide the counselling (as part of training, for example). If the therapists are paid, this requires funding.
- A coordinator to plan the sessions and work with the therapist(s).
- A place where the counselling sessions take place.
- A communication strategy to reach out to sex workers.

### Examples

#### Tais Plus, Kyrgyzstan

Tais Plus has provided free counselling for sex workers in the past, both with a trained therapist and through funding. There had been significant barriers against sex workers' access to the service due to the high prevalence of stigma surrounding both sex work and mental health in Kyrgzstan. As a response to that the organisation's coordinators suggested making a campaign to break those stigmas.

#### European Sex Workers' Rights Alliance (ESWA), Europe

ESWA has developed a series of sessions for a limited number of LGBTQI+ sex workers' rights activists to attend support sessions in a closed group with certified therapists. The participants met every two weeks during two months to talk about their mental health in a safer space.

## EXAMPLE OF BEST PRACTICE, HYDRA'S PROJECT "ACUTE HELP FOR TRAUMA"

### Resources needed

- A coordinator.
- This project requires financial and human resources in order to train the therapists and compensate sex workers for their work.
- A communication strategy to reach out to sex workers.

### What is it, and how did it start?

In 2019 sex workers were invited at a roundtable by the municipality of Berlin, Germany, to look at issues faced by sex workers and find potential solutions together. One important finding that came out is that sex workers do not have the same access to healthcare.

From that meeting, the project "Acute help for trauma" was born to tackle the issue of access to mental healthcare for sex workers. The project is currently running in Berlin and Potsdam but will be extended to other cities in Germany.

### How does it work?

FOR MENTAL HEALTH CARE PROFESSIONALS

Once contact is established between Hydra and a therapist, an extensive screening call is planned to evaluate whether the therapist would be a good fit for the project. If it is the case, the therapist attends the training which includes:

1. Basic training about sex work: appropriate language to use, cultural, historical and legal aspects of sex work.
2. In depth training about the stigma around sex work and other intersections affecting sex workers (race and ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, migration status etc.).
3. An individual exchange between a sex worker and a therapist: the sex worker evaluates the skills and knowledge of the therapist about sex work with the help of a questionnaire.

FOR SEX WORKERS

Sex workers come in contact with the counsellor through different ways:

1. They are already in contact with a social worker who advises them to contact a counsellor
2. They know Hydra through the peer-to-peer café. They are invited to have an extended talk with a counsellor to identify their needs.
3. The sex worker contacts Hydra by phone, email or on a walk-in basis.
    - The counsellor establishes the needs and wants of the sex worker related to therapy (woman therapist, trans-friendly therapist, racialised therapist,for example).
    - The social worker presents to the sex worker a list of a few therapists that fit their needs.
    - The sex worker can decide whether they want to contact the therapist themselves or need mediation with the social worker, who can then contact the therapist and/or accompany the sex worker in the session.
    - The sex worker can give anonymous feedback about the therapist and the social worker.

## How does it work financially?

The project is financed by the municipality of Berlin and covers 10 sessions per sex worker for a total of 31 sex workers. Therapists are paid their regular fee. Sex workers involved in the training of therapists are paid for their expertise.

The goal of the project is to stabilise sex workers' mental health after they have been through traumas. Once the 10 sessions are over, other steps are possible, such as continuing therapy at their own costs, and receiving support from a social worker for issues such as housing, visas and residence permits, health insurance etc.

## Evaluation of the project and future plans

The project has been approved at the end of 2019. Therefore an in-depth evaluation is not available yet. However, the feedback has been very positive for all parties so far. Sex workers are happy to be able to access therapists in such a short time (1 to 2 weeks) compared to the regular system. t is also easier for sex workers to find sex work-friendly therapists. Therapists acknowledge that they do not know much about sex work but are ready to learn.

The main challenge that has been identified is the language barrier. To tackle this issue, Hydra plans to look for additional funding to cover translation costs.

Other future goals include finding extra funding to extend the number of workshops available for therapists and sex workers, as well as being able to offer therapy to more sex workers.

**Hydra also offers other services such as:**

- A cafe or regular meetup for sex workers who do not wish to see a therapist but prefer sharing their experience with colleagues.
- Counselling about social welfare services (financial help for unemployment, housing and child support etc.).
- Help in case of trafficking and exploitation.
- Advice for individuals who are considering to enter the sex industry, including advice on how to work safely.
- Advice for individuals who are considering to stop sex work and re-orientate.
- Advice about tax matters.
- Counselling for relatives of sex workers.
- Peer-to-peer workshops on topics such as consent, professional development etc

# RESOURCES ON HOW TO DEAL WITH...

## ANXIETY

- On grounding and acute stress release.
- On coping with anxiety.
- Worksheets to cope with anxiety.
- Video about calming down, turning off the fight-flight-freeze response.
- "Guidelines for the prevention of emotional burn-out for activists from key populations in crisis/emergency including covid" (in Russian) from Indigo Plus and UNFPA to support activists' mental health from key populations (including sex workers).

## PHYSICAL AND SEXUAL VIOLENCE

- On addressing violence against sex workers.
- A self help guide for survivors of rape and sexual assault and their supporters.
- On sexual violence.

## ADDICTIVE AND COMPULSIVE BEHAVIOUR AND DRUG DEPENDENCY

- On addictive and compulsive behaviours.
- Information about drugs.
- On people who use drugs and mental health.

## SUICIDAL THOUGHTS

- On coping with suicidal feelings.
- On suicide awareness and prevention.
- A safety plan template to suicide prevention.
- On losing someone and grief.

## BODY IMAGE & WELL-BEING

- On body image.
- Worksheets to improve body image.
- Worksheets on strengths exploration.
- Free online yoga classes.

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